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ABSTRACT

Previous research into the interpersonal aspects of interorganizational relations has emphasized the importance of latent social roles in studying community leaders. Following Merton's (1957) identification of two general types of influentials, Gouldner (1957, 1958) identified persons focusing on organizational loyalty over specialized skills as "locals" and, conversely, those committed to specialized skills and a predominantly external orientation as "cosmopolitans." Building on previous research into the interorganizational relations between a public school system and a department of parks and recreation in a small Virginia city, a 10-question interview schedule with organizational leaders was constructed to gather data relating to Gouldner's theory. Findings indicate that organizational leaders did reflect predominantly cosmopolitan and local social role orientations. In all, latent social role theory was helpful in understanding the major characteristics of interorganizational relations. Understanding the latent social role of the interorganizational program coordinator was especially useful in understanding these relations. While the importance of interpersonal dimensions cannot be ignored, other factors need to be considered in interorganizational analysis. The local/cosmopolitan distinction may be useful, however, both in determining the suitability of individuals for particular organizational tasks and in anticipating conflicts among leaders. (JBM)

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INVESTIGATING INTERORGANIZATIONAL RELATIONS USING LATENT SOCIAL ROLE THEORY

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INVESTIGATING INTERORGANIZATIONAL RELATIONS USING LATENT SOCIAL ROLE THEORY

The area of interorganizational relations has received increasing interest during the past two decades. Theorists and researchers have explored many aspects of interorganizational relations, including factors which facilitate and hinder effective coordination (e.g., environmental changes, interdependence, scarcity of resources, and need for exchange); organizational variables such as goals, structure, and nature of clients; and outcomes of efforts to coordinate among organizations. One area which has received very little attention in the literature is the role played by interpersonal relationships in facilitating interorganizational relations. Social role theory offers a conceptual framework for looking at such relationships.

In this study, inquiry was made into one ongoing interorganizational effort in order to explore, using the theory of local and cosmopolitan latent social role types (Gouldner, 1957, 1958), the ways in which interpersonal relationships affected the interorganizational relations. The objectives of this paper are: 1) to identify the importance of latent social roles in understanding interorganizational relations;

and 2) to discuss the implications of focusing on interpersonal relations in this interorganizational study. First, we will review the area studied, the research problem, and conceptual framework. Second, we will present the results of this study and draw implications for theory and practice.

Background

In a time of scarce resources, increasing change, and turbulent environments, public as well as private organizations are attempting to form interorganizational relationships to increase resources available for operation, reduce risks of new ventures, and fill program gaps. As citizens demand increased efficiency in the use of resources, the need to effect such coordination is great.

Negandhi (1975) and Aldrich (1975), in looking at the knowledge base of interorganizational concerns, concluded that only a small portion of the area has been investigated. Reid (1964, 1975), Denton (1975), and Weiss (1978) found that coordination among organizations is not natural or easily accomplished. Weiss, for example, in his study of community colleges and community schools, found that subjects desired a model to guide their efforts in interagency coordination.

Our interest in conducting this study was based on the needs expressed in the literature for a model of interorganizational relations and greater attention to interpersonal

aspects of interorganizational relations, as well as the results of a previous study (Schwartz, Linden, & Kaplan, 1981) which brought to light the importance of understanding interpersonal relations. Our particular interest in this investigation was in how those interpersonal relations affect the organizational relationships. Specifically, four research questions guided our inquiry:

1) Did the leaders of the two organizations studied reflect predominantly cosmopolitan or local characteristics?

2) Can differences and conflicts among the organizational leaders be explained by Gouldner's latent social role theory?

3) Did the individual who coordinated relations between the two organizations experience a cosmopolitan/local conflict? If so, how did she deal with it?

4) To what extent does Gouldner's latent social role theory help us to understand the nature of interorganizational relations in this setting?

Conceptual Framework

Social scientists have noted the importance of understanding personalities and interpersonal relationships in

the study of intraorganizational behavior for some time. Merton (1940), writing about bureaucracies and personality, said that

> empirical studies of the interaction of bureaucracy and personality should especially increase our understanding of social structure. . . . Studies of religious, educational, military, economic, and political bureaucracies dealing with the interdependence of social organization and personality formation should constitute an avenue for fruitful research. (p. 568)

Merton (1957) continued his earlier interest in the interplay of personality types with environmental factors in his research conducted in "Rovere," a town of 11,000 on the Eastern Seaboard. He distinguished two kinds of roles or functions which individuals assume in social settings: latent and manifest. Manifest functions were intended ones; latent functions were unintended and often unrecognized consequences which contribute to social adjustment or adaptation. Merton found the investigation of latent social roles especially helpful in studying community influentials in Rovere. Two general types of influentials emerged. Locals, the first type, were concerned primarily with their home city, with roots in the community, with establishing influence through a network of neighbors, with business, and with the "inside world" of their town. Cosmopolitans, the second type, demonstrated significant interest in the outside world, did not need to know many of their fellow townsfolk,

relied on prestige of past and present skills and achievement, and read material which related to the outside world rather than to the community in which they lived.

The notion of latent social roles was next used by Gouldner (1957, 1958), who borrowed Merton's notion of cosmopolitans and locals and adapted them to the organizational sphere. Gouldner operationalized the latent social role types according to three criteria: loyalty to the organization, commitment to specialized skills, and reference group orientation. In his investigations, Gouldner found that those individuals who scored high on organizational loyalty tended to score low on their commitment to specialized skills, and also tended to be oriented toward others in the organization (locals). Conversely, those who scored low in loyalty to the organization scored high in commitment to specialized skills and held a predominantly external reference group orientation (cosmopolitans).

Subsequent studies (Bennis, Berkowitz, Affinito, and Malone, 1958; Clark, 1966; Corwin, 1961; McEwen, 1956; Merton, Broom, and Cottrell, 1959; Reissman, 1949; Sheldon, 1971; Taggliacozzo and Seidman, 1956; and Wilensky, 1956) have validated or modified Gouldner's thesis. The notion of two latent social role types has been tested in a variety of settings. The research suggests that conflicts are inherent in the professional-organization and professional-bureaucrat interface.

Methodology

Two organizations, a public school system and a department of parks and recreation in a small Virginia city, served as the base for the study. We were looking for a setting in which an ongoing interorganizational realtionship had been established. Having studied previously (Schwartz et al., 1981) the relationship between this public school system and parks and recreation department, we chose to return to the site of these two organizations. Five organizational leaders most directly involved with the interorganizational relationship were interviewed and observed to determine the nature of their latent social roles. In addition, information about the organizational leaders was available through interview and observational data from a previous study of the two organizations (Schwartz et al., 1981).

The descriptive research approach was employed in the present study. No attempt was made to control certain variables and manipulate others. Rather, the concern was with what Best (1977) called functional relationships, the relationships between existing individuals, the observation and analysis of "events that have already taken place and are related to a present condition." (Best, p. 117)

Data Collection Methods

As the current study was based partially on the findings of the Schwartz et al. (1981) study, and because it was felt that the purpose of this study, the appropriateness of methodological consistency in the research setting, and the kinds of information being sought all argued for a continuation of naturalistic inquiry (Guba, 1978) methods, a reliance was made on one particular qualitive method, interviewing.

A ten question interview schedule was constructed to gather data relative to the four research questions. The interview schedule included questions used in previous research on cosmopolitan and local variables (Gouldner, 1957, 1958; Berger and Grimes, 1973; Flango and Brumbaugh, 1974; Thornton, 1970). Other questions were added by the researchers and the instrument was field-tested for validity and inter-rater reliability. Inter-rater reliability was determined by employing a percent of agreement procedure. It was determined that 75% agreement (agreement by all three raters on at least 75% of the interview responses) would be required to determine the presence of inter-rater reliability. The field test resulted in 79% agreement.

Because of the several factors which can affect the interview, it was decided that a modification of what Patton (1980) termed the standardized open-ended interview would

be employed in this study. Patton defined the standardized open-ended interview as one in which a set of questions was carefully worded and arranged, with the intention of taking each respondent through the same set of questions. It has limited flexibility, and is used when minimal variation is needed. Its strength is in the way it controls for "interviewer effects," the fact that it is efficient, allows for the instrument to be inspected by others, and may be more reliable than most interview forms.

Final interviews were conducted after each leader was contacted by telephone to request his or her involvement in the study. Once agreement was obtained, appointments were arranged at the leader's convenience. The interviews began with a general statement of the purpose: to provide the researcher with additional data concerning factors affecting the interorganizational relations. The use of the tape recorder was explained: to help the researcher gain as complete a picture of the organizational leaders' responses as possible, by allowing others to help in the data analysis process (complete confidentiality was assured). The interviews themselves took thirty to forty-five minutes to complete. Inter-rater percent of agreement on these interviews was 80%.

Data Analysis

To answer the first research question concerning the extent of each leader's localism and cosmopolitanism, ratings from the interview were reviewed and an overall

latent social role orientation for each leader was determined.

Once this was done, attention was turned to the second research question. There, those issues on which the leaders differed were studied. A difference was said to exist if two or more leaders identified the same issue as one over which a conflict occurred. Once it was determined that a conflict of views existed on a given issue, we determined whether that conflict could be explained by Gouldner's latent social role theory by examining the nature of the conflict. If it was determined that the conflict pertained to organizational versus professional needs, the core of Gouldner's theory, then it was considered directly related to the notion of cosmopolitans and locals. A disagreement on the academic qualifications for a position, for instance, would be considered directly related to Gouldner's theory if those who argued for higher qualifications did so because it would result in increased competence, while those arguing against focused on the money saved by allowing lower qualifications.

Scores of the raters were used to identify the latent social role orientation of the individual coordinating the interorganizational relations, thus addressing the third research question. Our interest was in learning whether this individual, who had to report to the four organizational leaders, had a similar or different orientation, the extent to which she experienced conflicts related to latent

social role, and how she dealt with such conflicts.

Triangulation was used as the method of data comparison. Data came from both the Schwartz et al. (1981) and the present studies. As an example of data triangulation in this study: the responses from a respondent's taped interviews led to a score and an initial determination of the respondent's local and/or cosmopolitan orientation. This finding was then compared with data from the previous study. Both confirming and disconfirming data were sought, in order to gain as complete a picture as possible.

The last research question asked to what extent Gouldner's latent social role theory was helpful in understanding the nature of the overall interorganizational relations. To answer this question, the five major themes which emerged from the Schwartz et al. (1981) study were first reviewed. Then the major findings from the present study were identified (concerning individuals' latent social role, the issues over which conflicts occurred, the relationship between these issues and cosmopolitan and/or local traits, and the ways in which the person charged with facilitating the interorganizational relations dealt with conflicts). Finally, a comparison of the themes from the first study with the major findings from the present one indicated the extent to which the present findings helped explain the first study's themes.

Results

It was found that Gouldner's theory was of some use in understanding the behaviors of the leaders and the nature of the organizational relations. Regarding the four research questions which guided the study, findings indicate that:

1) The organizational leaders did reflect predominantly cosmopolitan and local social role orientations.
2) Differences and conflicts noted among the organizations were explained by Gouldner's theory in two of the five instances studied, and a third difference was partly explained by the theory.
3) The coordinator of the interorganizational program experienced a conflict with the staff of one of the organizations concerning latent social role orientations, and occasionally with two other leaders on certain issues. She seemed to deal with conflicts by acknowledging the views of others and holding to her own inclinations.
4) Gouldner's latent social role theory was somewhat helpful in understanding the nature of interorganizational relations. It clearly helped explain the coordinator's emphasis on operational matters, and it identified key causes of the emphasis on program over process in the interorganizational relationship. In all, latent social role theory

was helpful in understanding four of the five major characteristics of the interorganizational relations.

Some themes from the findings also emerged. Some latent roles were clear cut, while others were mixed. Thus, according to these results, it may be possible to be both cosmopolitan and local. Although, in general, knowing the latent social roles of the organizational leaders was useful in explaining relations between organizations, understanding the latent social role of the coordinator of the interorganizational program was especially helpful in understanding the relationship. Finally, many of the factors which emerge from the literature on interorganizational relations and the pressures which encourage and discourage such cooperation also emerged in this study.

Conclusions

This study may be of significance on two levels, theoretical and applied. Theoretically, the emphasis on interpersonal relationships in understanding ongoing interorganizational relations was found to be useful. In addition, the Gouldner perspective was useful in understanding organizational-professional conflicts and other issues. However, certain aspects of the organizational leaders' behaviors were not explained by the Gouldner theory.

In terms of applied significance, one conclusion for practitioners is simply that the importance of the interpersonal side, of working at achieving solid rapport with key individuals, cannot be ignored. Whether one believes that interpersonal relationships come about "naturally" or require conscious work, the findings suggest that the question of which individuals work well together merits attention. Practitioners could focus on interpersonal dimensions when initiating interorganizational efforts, and when they find that attempts at interorganizational relations are going poorly. However, the practitioner who not only focuses on interpersonal relationships but also labels the focus as such may find others in the interorganizational setting somewhat threatened by that approach, as we found when presenting our findings to the subjects of this study. Thus, while an emphasis is useful the words used to describe it may be problematic.

The second conclusion focuses on the need, when examining interorganizational situations, to consider as many other factors as possible in the analysis. Factors such as environmental changes and pressures and the extent of interdependence among organizational parts often play a major role.

Two further conclusions were drawn related to the application of Gouldner's latent social role theory by practitioners. One is that Gouldner's theory can offer a

conceptual tool, an approach for understanding and managing interpersonal relationships. Rather than assigning such relationships to the realm of "chemistry" with unpredictable half-lives, the practitioner may gain insights which allow for prediction and some sense of control once the latent social roles of individuals are understood. Given the external orientation of cosmopolitans, for instance, their interest in ideas, in profesional development, it may be useful to look to individuals with cosmopolitan latent social role tendencies to help initiate new programs and services. Locals, with their greater loyalty to organization, to internal dynamics, to stability, are probably most helpful in maintaining existing programs, in refining and improving ongoing activities.

The last conclusion also offers guidance to those attempting interorganizational relations. Findings from the present study indicate that the two individuals whose latent social roles were rated strongly cosmopolitan or strongly local on the study's interview were predictable in their behavior, especially in their positions on issues which contain organizational-professional tension. It was concluded that knowledge of such latent social role types may allow one to anticipate conflicts among leaders, and this ability can improve the practitioner's skill at managing potential conflicts in the relationship. In the present

study, we learned that those with cosmopolitan characteristics tended to favor such ideas as staff development, involvement in professional associations, attendance at regional and national conferences. They also supported certain proposals related to the interorganizational program which reflected an emphasis on professional over organizational needs. Locals took opposing views. If cosmopolitans and locals take similar positions in other settings, knowledge of such tendencies may be useful to practitioners who realize that to manage conflicts and differences, it is useful to first anticipate them.

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